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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUEHJD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

RUEHLN/AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG 4211

RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 2178

RUEHYG/AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG 2499

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002739

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SUBJECT: MOSCOW GAY RIGHTS MARCH: POLICE LOOK ON AS
MARCHERS ATTACKED

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The May 27 gay rights demonstration and its aftermath highlight two disheartening trends in Russia: the increasing collusion between security forces and nationalist groups, and the reluctance of the human rights community to engage on an issue that has little resonance with Russians. Neo-fascist and nationalist groups attacked would-be participants in a banned gay rights march in Moscow under the watchful eyes of the security forces. Following the attack, the police detained several gay rights activists while allowing their attackers to go free. EU embassies whose citizens were attacked complained to the GOR, while Russian human rights groups remained muted in their criticism. End summary.

The Gay Rights Demonstration

¶2. (SBU) On May 26, gay activists held a conference "Gay Rights as Human Rights" and attempted a march on Moscow city hall despite a ban on what Mayor Luzhkov called their "Satanic" demonstration. Nikolay Alekseyev of the Human Rights Project and other march organizers, joined by several European parliamentarians, were met by special forces troops and surrounded by journalists upon their arrival at Mayor Luzhkov's office. They were detained, pushed into a van, and transported to police headquarters, where they were held overnight.

¶3. (SBU) Approximately 100 other gay rights activists were then confronted by nationalist, neo-fascist, and ultra-conservative counter-demonstrators. An Embassy officer on the scene observed that the police did not separate the demonstrators from the counter-demonstrators. The counter-demonstrators threw eggs, water, and punches at the gay right activists while the police watched. Several activists were detained by the police after being beaten by counter-demonstrators (approximately 30 gay rights activists and four counter-demonstrators were detained). Four Western European Green Party and other leftist politicians (the UK's Peter Tatchell, German Bundestag member Volker Beck, and two Italian members of the European Parliament) were also assaulted by the counter-demonstrators and then detained by the police. Tatchell (who was later diagnosed with a mild concussion) told us that he was kept in a police van with three neo-Nazis and taunted by police, who denied him medical attention for more than an hour.

Homosexuality as Demographic and Security Threat

¶4. (SBU) Vsevolod Chaplin, deputy head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, told us that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) did not support the anti-gay protesters, despite the presence of several ROC priests in the ranks of those violently protesting the demonstration. The ROC had, however, spoken out in opposition to the gay rights march. The ROC External Affairs office issued a statement on May 23 saying, "The Russian Orthodox Church considers parades by sexual minorities an unacceptable practice that encroaches on the moral standards shared by our multiethnic people, on public order, and, in the long term, on the future of our people. Degradation of a nation is an inevitable threat if its people do not procreate. So, in the long term, propaganda of homosexuality is an appeal for the annihilation of our people." President Putin's aside (at a February 2 press conference) portraying homosexuals as a demographic threat has since been picked up by the ROC and others.

European Reaction

¶5. (SBU) In the wake of the detentions, the Italian Embassy petitioned authorities to release its nationals. The Italian members of the European Parliament and one member of the European Commission were charged with illegally crossing police lines. The German Embassy called the Moscow city government and the Russian Interior Ministry to secure the release of Volker Beck. The next day, the German Embassy accompanied Beck to the MFA and to the office of Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin to protest his treatment. Lukin asked that the complaint be submitted in writing. The British Ambassador is sending a letter to Foreign Minister Lavrov protesting the inaction of the police in the beating

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of Tatchell and others.

Organizers Next Steps

¶6. (SBU) March organizer Alekseyev said that he was held in a cell overnight with two other protesters and was treated well by the police. "They were almost apologetic, telling me that the orders to hold us overnight came "from the highest levels," which Alekseyev took to mean Luzhkov. He was charged the next morning with disobeying a police order and failure to produce identity documents. Alekseyev is confident that the video and eyewitness evidence that he will produce at his hearing on June 8 will lead the court to drop the charges.

¶7. (SBU) Alekseyev was pleased with the amount of media coverage the demonstration had received and was already planning another march next May. He also planned to file a case against the authorities for illegally banning the march, as he had done last year. He appealed last year's ban to the European Court of Human Rights and expects his case to be heard within the next few months. Alekseyev is also working with several European Green parties to institute a travel ban on Mayor Luzhkov and other officials as a way of pressuring the authorities to allow the march.

Muted Response from Russian Human Rights Groups

¶8. (SBU) The Human Rights community has voiced only muted support for the gay rights activists. The Moscow Helsinki Group provided the venue for the pre-demonstration press conference but did not otherwise participate. Human Rights Watch (HRW) Moscow Director Allison Gill told us HRW Russia did not send anyone, but HRW's office for Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) issues sent two observers from New York to the demonstration, one of whom was detained.

¶19. (SBU) Human rights expert Kirill Babichenko told us that many human rights advocates find the issue of gay rights distasteful or "not serious" and distance themselves from it.

Gill and Alekseyev said that the gay rights activists themselves disagree about the best approach, with many believing that a demonstration could backfire. Gill said that the participation in the demonstration of Duma Deputy Aleksey Mitrofanov of Zhirinovskiy's party had turned many supporters away from the event. While many Russian human rights supporters see the dispersal of the gay rights demonstration as a violation of the right to freedom of assembly, they are not saying so publicly. In a May 30 letter, for example, the leaders of several human rights groups asked the G8 leaders to "explicitly and unambiguously bring to the attention of Mr. Putin...your concern about the gross, mass, and defiant violations of the most fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms." The letter mentioned the crackdown on the Other Russia demonstrations of 2006 and 2007, but omitted the gay rights demonstration.

¶10. (SBU) In a post-demonstration conversation, Mitrofanov described to us his efforts to avert the beatings of gay-rights demonstrators. The unwillingness of law enforcement to intervene caused him and members of the pop music group t.A.T.u. to flee the scene of the march at one point. Mitrofanov said he attended the march because "seven percent" of his electorate is gay or supports gay rights. His efforts to have a representative of Mayor Luzhkov's office accept a petition about the march signed, he said, by fifty Europarlamentarians were ignored.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The events of May 27 suggest that there is at least the passive cooperation of the security forces and nationalist groups in stanching protests by a group that enjoys little popular support. The muted response of the Russian human rights community to this unsettling practice reflects the widespread homophobia in Russian society and the difficult path facing gay rights activists.

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